

Editorial Intent

Special Number: The Emperor and the Japanese Culture

In 2019, the imperial succession rites were conducted and Japan entered a new era referred to as Reiwa 令和, leaving behind the previous Heisei 平成 period. The new emperor formally ascended to the Chrysanthemum throne, and the former one became emperor emeritus. However, when Japan shifted from Shōwa 昭和 to Heisei in 1989, it was because the Shōwa emperor had passed away, not as a result of an abdication as in 2019.

For this reason, among others, in 2019 many Japanese seemed to welcome the change of era in a celebratory mood. For example, as the new imperial era “Reiwa” takes its name from ancient poetry, the region in which those poems were read for the first time became a frequent topic in conversations. Also, numerous worshippers paid visit to sanctuaries to receive the seal stamp commemorative of Reiwa’s first year. In other contexts, people often talked about the scarcity of heirs to Japan’s throne, and the possibility of a future empress was extensively debated. Any topic related to “the emperor” received wide media coverage, and interest on the subject increased throughout the country.

In that Japanese culture revolves around the emperor’s figure, his presence is an element of the utmost importance in rituals, religion and culture. This is the reason why we decided to set up the issue number two of *Kokugakuin Japan Studies* as a special issue devoted to the emperor’s figure.

Among the contributions to the issue, the article by Professor Tosa Hidesato is an attempt to shed light on Empress Genmei’s (660-721 CE) personal feelings, this by means of a thorough investigation on the poems she left in the compilation *Man’yōshū* (759 CE). Truly, in times like these, when many people debate on whether a woman can ascend the Chrysanthemum throne, it is crucial to know more about the existence of ancient empresses in Japan.

On the other hand, Professor Ōishi Yasuo focuses on the *Man’yōshū*’s poems known as *baika no uta* 梅花の歌 (“plum blossom poems”) from which stemmed the new era’s name “Reiwa.” His study provides new insights on the intention behind the composition of such poems, and at the same time, explores the possible image that people from the Nara

period may have had about plum blossoms.

At the occasion of the rite Daijōsai 大嘗祭 performed for the new Heisei emperor in 1989, critical debate spread throughout the country on topics such as the separation of politics and religion. Conversely, no criticism whatsoever seems to have arisen at the time of the Reiwa succession. This relates to the article by Professor Motegi Sadasumi, which, looking in retrospect to the Heisei enthronement rites, discusses the meaning of performing ancient Court Shinto rituals in modern times.

It is our intention to present here these three different outlooks on the emperor's figure, three purposeful works whose content cover a vast historical period, from *Man'yōshū*'s era to the present times.

KJS Editorial Committee